

THE WHITE HOUSE
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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT D.C. CENTRAL KITCHEN

D.C. Central Kitchen
Washington, D.C.

1:12 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you so much. Well, let me begin by thanking Robert Egger and all the students, the graduates, the staff, the volunteers who have made D.C. Central Kitchen one of the greatest sources of community strength in our entire nation. I want to thank Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton, your member of Congress; and Representative Tim Roemer from Indiana, for joining us today. I want to thank my longtime friend, your D.C. Council Chair, Charlene Drew Jarvis. And I think we have four other city council members here — thank you all for coming. And I want to thank Harris Wofford, the gentlemen who runs our national service effort and the AmeriCorps members who are here today. And, Harris, thanks for the jacket. We now have over 150,000 young Americans who have served in AmeriCorps since we established it in 1994. That's a pretty good record, and I'm very proud of them.

I just wanted to also say, most importantly, thank you to Donna Simon. I am very proud of her. And she did a good job today, didn't she — and her daughter. (Applause.) Now, last year we made lasagna. Today I had to put the filling in the bell peppers. And I did it with Steve, Melody, and Michele — they're all better than I am. But I love working again this year, I had a good time and I learned about three other people.

I want to say three things about D.C. Central Kitchen and its recipes. First of all, this place offers a recipe for opportunity. It's an empowerment classroom. You heard Donna's story, and one of the things I learned a long time ago in life is that everybody has got a story. Everybody's got a story. And most of them are pretty interesting. And they're all still being written. And the nice thing about your life story is you get to get up and write a page every day, and you have to decide — no matter how bad things are, no matter what bad has happened to you, no matter what mistakes you've made — you still get to get up and write a new page every day. And this place helps people write good pages in that story.

I want to tell you, last year, in addition to Donna, I met a lot of other interesting people here last year. I met a man last year named Francis Hill — stand up here. (Applause.) I want to tell you about this guy.

He had been living on the streets for 10 years before he got into this program. Right after he graduated he went to work at the Café Atlantico -- a pretty high-tone joint not very far from here. (Laughter.) Within weeks he was promoted. In fact, someone on my staff talks to his boss, who said he is by far the best worker he has ever had. He has now moved into his own apartment, bought his own car, just got engaged to his long-time girlfriend, Wanda — good for you, that was a good thing to do. (Applause.) And he proposed while cooking a meal for her at home, a side benefit of being in this program here. (Laughter.) So this place is a recipe for opportunity. Thank you for being Exhibit A.

The D.C. Central Kitchen also offers a recipe for service. Every year — listen to this — every single year here, 5,000 volunteers roll up their sleeves and give something back to their community. People like Jose Andres, one of the premier young chefs in America. Is he here today? Stand up here, Jose. (Applause.) Now, despite the, literally, crazy demands of his job, he comes here every single week to share his passion and skills with all the students, and he encourages other friends to join him every time he comes.

Just imagine what we could achieve if everyone in this community and in every community where there is a need like this rose to the call of citizen service the way you have. Thank you very much. We honor you, sir. (Applause.)

Finally, I'd like to point out D.C. Central Kitchen also does offer a recipe for alleviating hunger. And I want everyone in America to pay attention to this, too. We're ending this century on a very high note. We have the strongest economy in my lifetime. We have the lowest unemployment in 30 years, the lowest African American and Hispanic unemployment ever recorded, the lowest poverty rate in 20 years. All those statistics are very good and it's all true and it's wonderful.

But when I left church Sunday morning, there were still a lot of people in Lafayette Park lined up behind those vans waiting to get fed. And I think it is very important that we not forget that with all of the increasing number of jobs — and some of you represent that — with a decreasing poverty — some of you represent that — the number of people that are in really dire straits is still very, very significant. For -- a lot of them have a lot of medical reasons, mental health reasons, other reasons. But they're still out there, they're on the streets, they have no food to eat. Requests for emergency food in this community have, in fact, been increasing in recent years. So I want to thank you for that.

This place takes food that would otherwise go to waste, and provides 3,000 meals a day — think of that — just the D.C. Central Kitchen, 3,000 meals a day. Now, I want to send out another message to America. There are people who need food in every community of any size in this country. The Department of Agriculture estimates that 96 billion pounds — let me say that again, 96 billion — not million — billion pounds of food is lost every year that could be consumed -- from slightly bruised fruit at wholesale markets to unsold trays of lasagna at restaurants — not my lasagna — (Laughter.)

So you remember what Mr. Egger said at the beginning of this. He said, you know, last year when I was here there were 21 community kitchens like this one around the country; now there are going to be more than twice that many in this year. And you should be very proud of that. Among all the other messages, I hope this message will get out: in every community, civic-minded people ought to take an inventory of how much food is being wasted, where it is, how to gather it up, how to give it to the

churches, the synagogues, the mosques and whoever else has a homeless mission that will take care of that food and get it out. When you think about the amount of food that has been wasted and the number of people you see lined up at every soup kitchen, at every community stop, at every place — not just here, but around the country — it is appalling.

And all we need is a system like you have in every community in America, and there wouldn't be any hungry people in this country — 96 billion pounds of food is more than enough to feed all the hungry people in America. And it's just being wasted.

So I hope that communities — I hope that where this message goes out, if this is a problem in other communities, they'll look at the D.C. Central Kitchen model and they'll go to work trying to save the wasted food. This is a job that all of us have to do — government, but also community service organizations. And I think that what we've tried to do is to emphasize the role of the community organization and to make sure that they knew what we had in terms of resources that could help.

A few years ago, I signed the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act, which now makes it a lot easier for private companies to donate food — and for people like you to prepare and distribute it. Our Agriculture Secretary, Dan Glickman, has gotten the whole government working on food rescue programs like this one. And now the Agriculture Department is working around the country to form new grass-roots partnerships to fight hunger, to increase local food production and to help low-income families move into independence. But we've got to have the support of volunteers, and we have to have the willingness of the community.

We come here at holiday season because everybody's thinking about this. But what we should do at holiday season is to make commitments that last all year long, not just at the holiday season. The AmeriCorps members here — I want to say again how proud I am of you and what a testament you have been to the proposition that working with others is not a burden, it is a joy; it is not just a duty, it is a privilege. And whether you are preparing meals or teaching a child to read or painting an old school, you always get more than you give. And most of us get out of this life ahead of where we would be if all we got is just what we deserve. (Laughter.) And I think this is really an important thing to remember at this season.

So, again, I want to thank all of you. Thank you, Robert Egger; thank you, graduates; thank you trainees; thank you, staff and volunteers and supporters of the D.C. Central Kitchen. You have captured the spirit of the season, and I hope others will catch it from you. Thank you and God bless you. (Applause.)